
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Designation Case No. 91-05

Staff Report for

Third Church of Christ, Scientist and the Christian Science Monitor Building

900-918 16th Street and 1601-1605 I Street, NW

Square 185, Lot 41

Meeting Date: November 1, 2007
Applicants: The Committee of One Hundred on the Federal City and the D.C.
Preservation League
Affected ANC: 2B

After careful consideration, the staff recommends that the Board designate the complex consisting of Third Church of Christ, Scientist and the Christian Science Monitor Building at 16th and I Streets, NW, as a District of Columbia landmark. Contingent upon the assent of the property owner, it is further recommended that the application be forwarded to the National Register of the Historic Places with a recommendation that the property meets the National Register criteria for designation as of statewide significance.

The preparation of this report involved much evaluation and discussion—within the Office of Planning and with the property owners and applicants—of the resource, its merits, and the challenges to its future adaptability. As a matter of law, the staff believes that the property meets at least two of the Board’s designation criteria and thus should be landmarked. The property owners in this case strongly oppose its designation, with an understandable argument that the shortcomings of the buildings diminish the degree to which they can be considered successful and, thus, significant. It is always with reluctance, and fairly rarely, that we recommend a designation over an owner’s objection. Indeed, it was in the hope of encouraging a resolution acceptable to the parties that this case was postponed indefinitely, a period that came to total fifteen years. HPO is mindful of the relative inflexibility of the spaces and structure of the two buildings and of the practical issues with condition and maintenance, especially of building systems. HPO does believe that there are ways to develop the site while preserving and incorporating the essence of this potential landmark and is hopeful that in addressing those issues directly that we can help realize such a positive conclusion.

The completion of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist edifice and the Christian Science Monitor Building in 1971 was the culmination of a two-decade effort on the part of a local Christian Science congregation to find a replacement for its former church at 13th and L Streets, NW. It was only in the mid 1960s that the Boston “Mother Church” agreed to demolish its own 16th Street building, holding the Washington office of the Committee on Publications, in favor of new offices for both the Committee and the Christian Science Monitor publishing and broadcasting arm. This freed the rest of the lot for a second structure, and the Third Church congregation was eventually able to work out an arrangement with the Mother Church to be co-located on the site. The

remaining years were occupied by design and fundraising for construction. From a perspective appreciative of the development of architecture in Washington, and particularly of the “recent past,” the timing was fortuitous, because the result was one of the best examples of Brutalism in the Washington area and one of the most important Modernist churches.

Brutalism refers to the a phase or sub-style of the International Style characterized by the use of exposed, unadorned, roughly cast concrete to construct buildings of “stark forms and raw surfaces,” frequently massed in a manner variously referred to as blocky, chunky, or of “striking repetitive angular geometries.” The term was coined in the mid 1950s to describe the postwar works in concrete by Le Corbusier, especially at Chandigarh, India, and by those inspired by his approach and methods. It was applied broadly so as to include rough masonry construction that was not wholly concrete but similar in roughness, starkness and massing.

The complex

The church project was part of a complex of two buildings both connected and separated by a central plaza. Although the buildings have had distinct occupants (but related to the Church of Christ, Scientist), for reasons of cost, zoning, unitary ownership, and the First Church of Christ’s intention to construct offices for the Christian Science Monitor, the buildings were physically united by sharing building systems and an underground garage. More important, the two buildings conspicuously relate to each other in terms of orientation; in their use of nearly frameless, butt-glazed and flush-mounted glass; the incorporation of a unifying wall/passage at the rear of the lot; and, most important, materials and methods of construction. Both buildings are of poured-in-place reinforced concrete, roughly cast with clear evidence of the formwork and containing a red sandstone aggregate to lend a warm tone similar to limestone. The floors are rigid waffle slabs, creating impressive square-gridded, coffered ceilings containing the interior lights and systems and, more important, supporting the entire floor plate from the outer bearing walls without intervening columns. The ceiling is an interesting upward termination of the church’s auditorium space, and in the lower-ceilinged office building, it emphasizes the open horizontality of the plan. The columnless effect is pronounced as well on the exterior of the Christian Science Monitor Building, creating a visual tension in the vertical alternation of massive, integral concrete (as opposed to applied panels) with the relatively insubstantial glazing.

The principal design architect, Araldo Cossutta with I.M. Pei & Partners, located and oriented the L-shaped Christian Science Monitor building generally perpendicular to the street to obscure the view of the “ugly” side wall of the World Center Building from the church. The new office building thus bounded the courtyard and, with the church, created an inward-focused unity. Visually, the office, with its expanse of ribbon windows, provided a counterpoint and appropriate backdrop to the more solid and vertical church. The plaza itself was intended to provide a public gathering space and an appropriate the setting for the buildings, allowing sufficient space for them to be seen and understood in the round. Cossutta and Pei had seen enough contemporary structures to recognize that Modernist buildings, especially sculptural ones, typically suffered from being shoehorned into a more or less continuous street wall.¹ The plaza’s glazed, herringbone brick continued from outdoor surface through the lobbies—a typically Modernist gesture of interpenetration of spaces—and the configuration of the exterior paving responded in part to a desire to retain a couple of mature trees.

¹ One can criticize the church’s relationship to I Street, but one can also imagine the unfortunate effect of switching the positions of the two buildings and thus bracketing the church between two taller, rectilinear structures.

Critical reaction

From the beginning, the complex was recognized as unique in Washington. It won the Washington Board of Trade's Award for Excellence in Architecture and a craftsmanship award for the concrete work from the Washington Building Congress. On the other hand, *Washington Post* architecture critic Wolf von Eckardt was in many ways critical of the church building for its siting and exterior, especially for an apparent anti-urban closing-off from the street ("arrogantly detached," in a manner he would compare to Wright's Guggenheim) and for the provision of a private courtyard that he correctly predicted would fail to invigorate the streetscape. In many respects, von Eckardt had valid points; the exterior's intended austerity becomes overbearing on the I Street side of the corner. Over the next three decades, the courtyard did prove a failure in light of its intended use.

Von Eckardt was ultimately unfairly critical of the "billboard" carillon projecting from the "horizontal belfry" in the upper part of the main mass. It was certainly understandable as his own opinion, and because the feature was definitely innovative. It is an interesting sculptural feature, an outward-slid piece of the very body of the church and a focal point for not only the building itself but also for a part of town that had increasingly become dominated by regularly rectilinear commercial buildings. The bells, and the distinctiveness of the form and expression building itself reasserted the importance of the spiritual sphere within the secular city.² A contemporary *Post* photographer captured on film the relationship and contrast between these bells and the steeple of nearby St. John's Church.³

Although von Eckardt was mainly negative in his assessment, he could not help but acknowledge, despite touring the building before it was complete, that,

I.M. Pei and his group are not only famous but often very good. This "sculptural church building," as Cossutta calls it, is unquestionably ingeniously designed.

There is a skylight all around the perimeter of the roof of the structure, so that great shafts of light flood the walls five stories down to the entrance lobby. The floor of the auditorium on the second level, as well as its balconies seem to float within this dramatic light well....

Yes, ingenious. Perhaps even quite beautiful.

Indeed, taking in the whole, one can fully appreciate Cossutta's conception and intent. The church's formidable exterior sets up a tension that is relieved, resolved and explained by entering it. A serene lobby space gives way to a stepped approach to this auditorium that builds expectation as when entering a theater. It is followed by a quiet, yet powerful and dynamic, that succeeds for its play of mysteriously sourced natural light across a high, broad, columnless, formally geometric auditorium which is austere but textured, like the exterior, and yet somehow

² In a manner similar to the Harry Weese-designed Seventeenth Church of Christ, Scientist (1968) that won a 25-Year Award from the Chicago chapter of the AIA: "To further enforce the design, the concrete structure is articulated along the exterior, guiding the eye from street level to the lantern above [or in the present case, the belfry]. These forms contrast with the rectilinear, tall buildings surrounding the church. Despite its modernity, the contrast in scale between the Church and its surroundings is as effective as a traditional tall church in a neighborhood."

³ And another staff writer penned an appreciative item titled "Edifice Reflects Simple Faith."

intimate.⁴ The upper floors contain surprises as well, including the bright Sunday school space with its terrace tucked behind a screening parapet.

Despite the Third Church project's negative aspects and the fact that Brutalism and Modernism in general were no longer fashionable within a few years, the complex's stock rose rapidly over a remarkably short time. Including the complex in the 1974 second edition of *A Guide to the Architecture of Washington, D.C.*, its authors, members of the local AIA chapter, consciously responded to the earlier criticism:

While the plaza has been criticized as unnecessary here on 16th Street, the tension of tower, wall and octagon make this, perhaps, the most satisfying new complex in the city.

The simplicity of form and opening are carried off by exposed-concrete work which gives lie to the theory that architectural craftsmanship is a dead art.

The United States Commission of Fine Arts included an appreciative article in the second volume of its *Sixteenth Street Architecture* in 1988. That the building was then only seventeen years old was certainly notable at the time: "[t]his chapter is the only selection in the current series of Commission of Fine Arts publications devoted to a contemporary building."

The Third Church of Christ, Scientist is a tour de force. Although other organizations have building complexes on Sixteenth Street (for example, the National Geographic Society), the Cossutta design is the only instance where as much importance is placed on the site plan as on the individual structures themselves. Though flawed, the ensemble is a complete and coherent entity that attempts to use its site as a palette, providing not just an entrance to a building but a civic arena, a sculpted open space that both excites and leads the eye.

Following this, the near sale of the property in 1990 spurred the present landmark nomination (received January 29, 1991), despite the fact that the complex was then merely two decades old. But local advocacy groups were not the only ones concerned about retaining it. A 1990 opinion piece in *Historic Preservation News* cautioned that the church was threatened with demolition.

Unfortunately, the International and Brutalist styles often do not engender affection, and it has been argued that the current historic preservation movement is a result of the reaction against such inhuman styles.... But I will gladly argue for their historical, architectural, and social importance....

We have a critical need to understand, to articulate, and to document the importance of postwar buildings; they should be assessed on the basis of their contribution to an understanding of a community's continuing history.

It will not be easy to evaluate the history of our own lifetimes, for while time does not always guarantee significance, its passage is generally required to confirm significance. If, however, we do not act now to begin a disciplined, objective assessment of our immediate past, we will become the lost generation.

⁴ Despite common preconceptions about concrete! I.M. Pei has said that "light for me is of paramount importance to buildings. Without the play of light, form is inert and space becomes static. I would like to think that when I design buildings light is one of my first considerations." Gero von Boehm, *Conversations with I.M. Pei: Light is the Key*.

A 1992 issue of *Architecture* magazine also reported (the passing of) the threat to this “rare example of Brutalism in the nation’s capital.”

While not as significant as Pei’s Christian Science Church Center in downtown Boston [also designed by Cossutta simultaneously with his Washington complex] or his East Wing of the National Gallery of Art... the poured-in-place concrete structures are an essay in bold urbanism and austere geometry that reflect the philosophy of Pei’s partner, Aldo Cossutta, who designed the project.

About the same time, representing a new generation of architecture critic, the *Washington Post*’s Benjamin Forgey presented the following even-handed evaluation of the complex:

It is, however, reasonable to assume that there is no overwhelming consensus for or against the Christian Science church complex. This doubtless has something to do with its recent vintage. The style is still controversial—the dust has not yet fully settled in the wake of critic Wolf von Eckardt’s 1970 salvo in the *Washington Post*: “New Church Design: Rude, Brutal, Military, Uncivilized.” But the uncertainty also has to do with the startling thought that so new a project might actually disappear before we’ve had much of a chance even to think about it. The nomination for listing on the local inventory of historic sites thus forces the issue. As always, the best place to start is with the thing itself.

The church is first of all outstanding, in the literal sense that it forcefully stands out from everything around it and in the metaphoric sense that it projects a fierce sense of spiritual independence. These were the intentions of architect Araldo Cossutta, who as a then-partner in the Pei firm was principally responsible for the design. Thinking of Le Corbusier, the 20th-century master with whom he briefly worked after World War II, and perhaps of the Gothic baptistery in Florence, the architect conceived a free-standing, concrete-sheathed octagonal structure on the corner.

It is a closed box, a powerful piece of sculpture, a solid block with a few telling slices in it. The box surrounds one of Washington’s more astonishing, if Spartan, religious rooms. A cross in plan, with four almost equal arms, the auditorium (or, in most denominations, the sanctuary) is a generous chamber with a strong, high ceiling of deep concrete coffers arranged in a grid of three-foot modules. High concrete walls east and west are washed by natural light, sometimes gently, sometimes with striking light-dark force.

The church is, as well, a part of a larger whole. The office building is something of an engineering feat with its long concrete spans above high, slightly tinted ribbon windows. Only 35 feet deep and squeezed against the back of the rectangular lot, it is altogether a commercial oddity. But it forms a simple, appropriate foil for the weighty mass of the church building. In between is a commodious courtyard consisting of the triangular plot of grass with three old trees and a paved surround of narrow bricks laid in a herringbone pattern. The western edge of the lot is defined by a concrete wall with a projecting canopy that should be, but isn’t, vine-planted. Simplicity is the secret here. The whole is very spare, very tense and yet very pleasing on its own terms. Each part definitively contributes to the effect.

In addition, there are plentiful architectural details that bespeak the Pei firm's famous dedication to consistency and high quality: the tinted poured-in-place concrete, the gridded ceilings, the herringbone bricks, the granite borders, the succinct entryways—each a little study in formal counterbalances, like superior geometric paintings.

There are, also, faults both minor and major. Among the lesser things wrong are the narrow, dark (though not wholly uninteresting) pedestrian passageway between the church and the western wall, and the many complaints tenants have about outdated mechanical systems. Church members say, for example, that it costs \$8,000 to replace a light bulb—it takes scaffolding to reach the auditorium ceiling. On the major side is the rough, mean way the church building addresses I Street: There's a fire door and those imposing concrete walls. Strolling by, one thinks, irresistibly, "bunker"—a forbidding impression that colors one's perception of the whole complex.

Such big faults are endemic to this minimalist architectural approach: Formal relations and geometric purity take precedence over approachability and street life. One confronts similar glaring deficiencies in other important Pei projects of the period—the windswept spaces of the otherwise stunning Christian Science complex in Boston, or the ground-level frontages of the gleaming Hancock Tower, also in Boston, or the scaleless plaza of the Dallas City Hall. It is almost as if I.M. Pei, the master himself, needed such mistakes in order finally to get things strikingly right at the National Gallery East Building, a tour de force both as a people place and as an exercise in solids and voids.

The church complex on 16th Street is no East Building. But on balance pluses far outdistance minuses. In addition to the qualities already discussed, there's something about the size of the place that endears—the whole was built to a low, humanizing, Washington scale. The church is, to be sure, a brooding, inward-looking piece; it's powerful, but it does not overpower. Conceived in strong contrast to Benjamin Latrobe's jewellike St. John's Church a block to the south, it is in itself a jewel—flawed, yes, but a notable contribution to the city's famous "street of churches."

There are those who worry greatly about the precedent of submitting so recent a project to the trying constraints of the preservation review process. Both the Third Church and the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston (which owns the land and manages the office building), strongly oppose the designation. Washington architect David Schwarz, a consultant to the churches, believes that designating properties "the day they're built" penalizes owners for hiring good architects, especially in cases such as this, where zoning allows a much larger building than actually was constructed. "It's going to encourage people to build buildings at no risk of being designated," he says. "They'll hire schlocky architects."

That seems a far-fetched worry, although the owners in such cases clearly are due reasonable leeway to adapt their properties to current needs. Still, failure to protect good modern architecture simply because it's modern and relatively new is bad

public policy. There's a simple test one can apply: Stand in front of such a building, close your eyes and picture it gone. If the result is that you would really, really miss it, then it may need help. For me, the complex at 16th and I streets passes the test, every time

Influences and the role of the architect

For the church design, Cossutta cited as his greatest inspiration Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois. These two projects thus share several characteristics, including their monumentality, the use of reinforced concrete as both structural and finish material⁵, the simple organ-pipe screen above the lectern, and the overall creation of a quiet, uplifting but undistracting sanctuary of the spirit, separated, at least for the time of worship, from a noisy world by massive walls lacking conventional windows.⁶ It would be odd if Cossutta did not also recall the interior of Le Corbusier's chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp (1954), another concrete edifice of much different massing but also wonderfully lit from without while remaining self-contained.⁷ Another obvious possible source would be the octagonal, Roman-era Temple of the Winds in Athens, but Cossutta apparently never referred to it in later interviews. The Christian Science Monitor Building's design pedigree can be traced directly back to Le Corbusier's slab-sided concrete buildings—and to Cossutta's earlier association with Corbu's atelier.

Araldo Cossutta is a very important figure in the early years of the Pei firm, from the time that Pei & Partners was still working exclusively for Webb & Knapp, real estate magnate William Zeckendorf's in-house design firm. Cossutta made partner in 1963 and led a design team of junior architects. To him is attributed the firm's embarkation on a long phase of construction exploring and celebrating the plasticity of concrete. One of I.M. Pei's biographers, Michael Cannell, recounts that

Having worked in Le Corbusier's Paris atelier, Cossutta argued against making the [Denver Hilton] hotel another Miesian box of glass and steel. He advocated instead the sculptural qualities of Le Corbusier's favorite material: concrete.... Until now Pei's work... had amounted to what Philip Johnson called "minor Mies." Cossutta helped shift Pei away from the Miesian glass-and-steel aesthetic and into the more expressive plasticism of sculptured concrete that would characterize his work for years to come.

A brief online biography of Pei summarizes well this period:

The East Wing represents the apogee of the concrete and masonry phase of the firm's work. The building contains all of the expertise the organization acquired in the first two decades of its operation. With the East Wing, all of the precision and boldness of past work is brought into focus. From Kips Bay Plaza through the Des

⁵ Or rather, not creating a distinction between structure and skin, an approach considered by Brutalists to be the most honest and straightforward.

⁶ Unity Temple is lit by skylights and clerestory windows. Looking at Third Church's sanctuary, one cannot help but think that the introduction of windows at the main level would not only have disturbed this feeling of sanctuary but detracted from the clean lines of the wall surface and emphasized a chunky thickness of the walls relative to the glazing. The traditional way of achieving such a separation between inside and out was to provide large windows decorated and obscured with stained glass.

⁷ Many of the chapel windows are square punched openings, tapering outward, like reverse loopholes, but there are also vertical slots, not unlike in Third Church's upper wall beneath the skylights.

Moines Art Center Addition (1968); the Everson Museum; the Mellon Center for the Arts at Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut (1972); the Atmospheric Research Center; the Christian Science Center in Boston (1973) (designed under the direction of Araldo Cossutta, who served as fourth partner from 1963-1973); the Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University (1973); and the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation Centre in Singapore (1976), Ieoh Ming Pei and Partners created a series of reinforced concrete buildings of consummate clarity and power.... In this body of reinforced concrete architecture, only the Dallas City Hall (1966-1977) stands out as an inelegant, rather ungainly sculptural form set on an arid plaza. With that noted exception, the work of this 10-year period is an incredible outpouring of sustained high quality endeavor.

Cossutta had been surprised when at age 30, he was first given charge of the Denver Hilton project. “‘It was a wonderful opportunity,’ he said, ‘and a credit to his flexibility. Frankly, I was surprised that Pei accepted what I did.’” “At the Denver Hilton, Araldo Cossutta had experimented with window frames of raw, unfinished concrete,” permitting the melding of skin and structure⁸

Although Pei has become a household name through these and other works, the contributions of his partners went beyond merely nudging the principal partner down this particular path. The success of the firm has naturally rested largely on their work. Even back with Webb & Knapp, as the work increased,

Pei had been drawn steadily away from the hands-on aspects of architecture. Skilled as he had become at sizing up vast chunks of urban space like those for Courthouse Square, Society Hill, or Kips Bay, he had all too often been obliged to leave the more intimate problem-solving to [Henry] Cobb, Cossutta, [Jim] Freed and others....

[Later,] Top billing came slowly for Cobb... who, along with Cossutta and Freed, quietly generated much of the firm’s design work while Pei, the high-profile front man, performed his diplomatic rounds.⁹

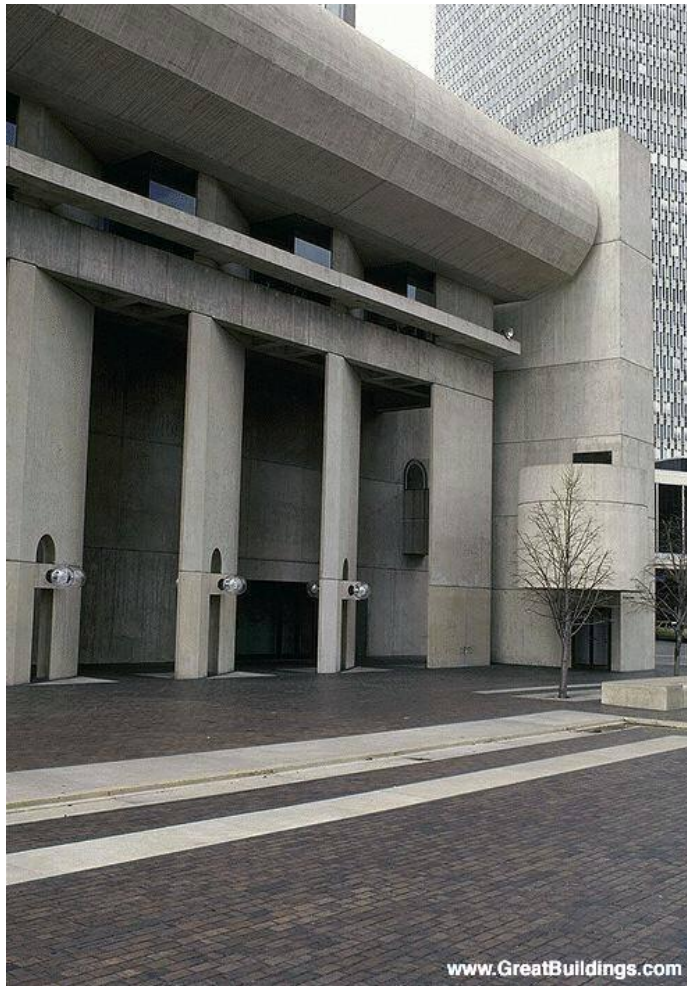
Pei himself acknowledged the sometimes small role he had in any particular project: “I felt trapped in the role of looking for jobs, being a procurer of commissions. While my people had the luxury of doing one job at a time, I had to keep track of the whole enterprise. My growth as a

⁸ Wiseman, *I.M. Pei: A Profile in American Architecture*; Cannell, *I.M. Pei: Mandarin of Modernism*.

⁹ “He had appraised large acreages... formulated a design concept and left the rest to Henry Cobb or Araldo Cossutta.” Cannell. Colleagues and competitors later described the design process in their own ways. According to Wiseman, “Pei’s design process is, said a veteran associate, ‘rather haphazard.’ But, the same associate added, ‘when you analyze the thought, it turns out to be highly rational.’... “Pei does not give orders; he leads by suggestion. In a 1991 oral history interview architect Harry Weese, a prominent Pei competitor, described Pei’s method thus: “See, I.M. is like me. He does most of the design himself, but he does it by sitting back like a professor and critting his partner.” And Wiseman generally agreed: “So closely did the teams work together with Pei, who would critique individual designs at regular intervals, that while the younger architects enjoyed unusual freedom, they began to develop a common ‘language’.... As [Henry] Cobb described it, the firm combined ‘the strength of a group practice with the strength of an atelier.’”

designer was stunted; I should have reached my maturity much earlier.”¹⁰ According to a 2003 Ben Forgey column in the *Post*,

Pei still likes this project [Third Church/Christian Science Monitor] and recently claimed more than a titular role in its design. “I had more to do with that one,” he said, explaining that he had to shift prime responsibility to Cossutta midway in the design process. Whoever is principally responsible, the pair of buildings makes a dignified urban landmark. The Monitor building is but a 35-foot-wide sliver clad in beautiful poured-in-place concrete and ribbons of glass. It would be a handsome building all on its own, but its main function here is to act as a foil for the church, a concrete octagon facing a serene triangle of grass. The church building is definitively inward-looking, a holy fortress in the midst of the busy city.



A portion of the Christian Science Center complex in Boston designed by Araldo Cossutta. Although this building is articulated with a Modernist take on a colonnade, similarities to his concurrent Third Church project are evident in the material, of course, and in the use of high openings over largely blank lower walls, a suddenly jutting balcony, and even the use of small arched openings that recall the lighting niches over the rear of Third Church’s auditorium (and light fixtures like those at L’Enfant Plaza!).

Evaluation

We are fortunate to have not only the landmark nomination (and the *Sixteenth Street Architecture* chapter) but a rebuttal from the church that provides additional valuable historical information

¹⁰ Cannell; *Washington Post* October 5, 2003.

from its own records. The argument and counterargument put the issues into clear relief. The rebuttal makes a compelling case that the church construction was not a project of the Mother Church, was not part of a national church movement, and was not connected to any centennial celebration of Christian Science. These points are important enough to justify the revision of the application to reflect the new information. This information does not, however, shake the central thesis of the importance of the complex architecturally.

There is no doubt that Cossutta is internationally prominent for his work—even if considered only for his work with the Pei firm. One of his most famous is the “post-Pei” Credit Lyonnais tower in Lyon, France. His firm is also responsible for a great number of large hotel and office projects and urban development plans. Major works with Pei include the Denver Hilton Hotel (1954-1960); University Gardens Apartments, Chicago (1956-1961); the Green Earth Sciences Building at MIT (1959-1964); the East-West Center at Manoa, Hawaii (1960-1963); the U.S. Embassy and Chancery at Montevideo, Uruguay (1960-1969); L’Enfant Plaza, Phase I, Washington, D.C. (1961-1968); the unrealized plan for the Tête de la Défense, Paris (1970-1971) and the projects for the Christian Science churches in Washington and Boston. The Pei firm is also well known, of course, for many projects completed after Cossutta departed in 1973, projects international, national and local. For Cossutta’s and the Pei firm’s involvement in this project, the complex meets the Historic Preservation Review Board’s designation criterion F, for “notable works of craftsmen, artists, sculptors, architects, landscape architects, urban planners, engineers, builders, or developers whose works have influenced the evolution of their fields of endeavor, or are significant to the development of the District of Columbia or the nation.”

But the measure of an architect is the quality of his or her work itself. The Third Church of Christ, Scientist/Christian Science Monitor Building complex is a striking and overall architecturally successful composition of great importance to Washington as one of its best example of Brutalism as a style and as characterized by a particular construction method.¹¹ Third Church is certainly one of the most important, if not the most important Modernist church in the city, and not merely because they are so rare.¹² For these reasons, the complex meets HPRB designation Criteria D

¹¹ Other examples are largely public buildings—a firehouse, a couple of schools, public housing, the FBI building, for instance—that are less successful.

¹² The supply of inner city churches outstripped the demand for them in a postwar city of shrinking population. And Washington has generally been conservative architecturally; von Eckardt’s critique was unintentionally also a critique of Washington: “But I fear for Washington, which is not a city of strong, brutal buildings, of experimentation and individual self-expression.” But in retrospect, both Washington and the church complex have stood up well.

The Church of Christ, Science has admirably embraced the best of new architecture in every era, including employing such architects as Bernard Maybeck and Carrere and Hastings during the early twentieth century. In a chapter on Christian Science architecture, Paul Ivey outlined two competing theories of approach that emerged at that time:

Briefly, [Chicago architect Solon Spencer] Beman’s camp believed the church should pronounce itself as the modern dispensation of the original primitive Gospel. The notion that Christian Science was a complete revelation led them to promote the more classical architecture of the Mother Church Extension as the appropriate idiom... that would inspire citizens with their public beauty.

Others, including [Milwaukee architect Elmer] Grey, believed that Christian Science was the culminating moment of the history of Christianity... emphasiz[ing] the resurrection of the human condition from matter to spirit... The religion’s self-representation, therefore, should underscore this continuous relationship with ecclesiastical Christendom. (*Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture*)

Over time, these two strands may have been united, in effect, by the passing away of classicism-as-reform, represented by the City Beautiful Movement, it being ultimately supplanted by more radical Modernist reform. And

and E, for “embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of architectural styles, building types, or methods of construction, or [as] expressions of landscape architecture, engineering, or urban planning, siting, or design significant to the appearance and development of the District of Columbia or the nation”; and “possess[ing] high artistic or aesthetic values that contribute significantly to the heritage and appearance of the District of Columbia or the nation.” For these reasons, it also meets the similar National Register Criterion C, as a property that “embod[ies] the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent[s] the work of a master, or that possess[es] high artistic values...” And the complex possesses amazingly high integrity (in all respects: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association), down to the original carpeting and seat upholstery in the church auditorium.

The District of Columbia’s historic preservation law does not contain a fifty-year rule-of-thumb but merely requires a sufficient amount of time to have passed to judge a property in its historical context. This is partly so as not to exclude obviously exceptional buildings of more recent eras. Reappraisal of this particular property began before it was even two decades old. And the fact that Modernism first became outmoded and then reappraised and revived within the years since this complex’s construction suggests that sufficient time has elapsed to permit us to judge this property as a product of its era.

as “ecclesiastical Christendom” as whole generally became comfortable moving away from classicism and Gothicism, any symbolic relationship that remained could persist. By the 1960s, a building such as Harry Weese’s Seventeenth Church in Chicago could be considered an appropriate, progressively minded edifice, and the Chicago AIA chapter could later remark that “The client has a tradition of assembly in spaces that are unorthodox in design.”

In addition to financing them in the first place, the church’s modern architectural gems have been a justifiable source of pride. A recent issue of the *Mary Baker Eddy Library Newsletter* described the expansion of the Christian Science Center complex thus: “As the decades rolled by, the area surrounding The Mother Church opened up, with gardens and green lawns evolving into today’s plaza and reflecting pool. In 1975 a glassed-in portico, designed by I.M. Pei & Partners and Araldo Cossutta Associated Architects, became the landmark building’s finishing touch.” At about the same time, the First Church’s senior manager for real estate planning and operations characterized a landmark study for the Mother Church complex as “the right thing to do.”

As for Third Church, although it suggests that the selection of the Pei & Partners was almost accidental, its own records indicate that it initially, and temporarily, selected a local architect only after being informed that the Pei firm was unavailable while working on the Boston complex. Even at the time of writing, the first paragraph on the church’s website refers to the architecture and to the Pei firm’s involvement. In a 1991 letter, Donald Bowersock, Treasurer of the First Church in Boston, wrote that: “Christian Science church buildings have traditionally been high quality buildings. They try to be open and welcoming, reflecting the attitudes of our Church. Throughout the country, many branch churches have hired fine architects to design beautiful structures. Thus, to design our new buildings in Washington, we engaged Araldo Cossutta, a principal designer with the firm of I.M. Pei and Associates and the designer of the Christian Science Center in Boston.”